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THE "UNCIAL" IN JEROME AND LUPUS

BY ELMER TRUESDELL MERRILL

The etymology and semasiology of the word "uncial," as applied to a certain style of ancient and mediaeval writing, are still involved in obscurity. Samuel Allen proposed to substitute for *uncialis* and its current derivation from *uncia* (an "inch-high" letter) an entirely new formation, *uncinalis*, which he explained as characterizing the curved shapes (cf. *uncus*) of the characters as contrasted with the more angular forms of the capitals that preceded them.¹ This was to postulate an early error in the transmitted text of the well-known passage from Jerome quoted below, and the perpetuation of it in all later writers who used the word. The improbability of this view was promptly and justly pointed out by Falconer Madan.² To the question of the origin of the type of letter, H. B. Van Hoesen made a valuable contribution, by indicating its dependence in large measure upon the Roman cursive, but the summary of his paper, read before the American Philological Association,³ has nothing to say about the origin or the history of the name. Indeed, I am not aware that anyone since Mabillon has been able to add any early citations of the word *unciales* in the paleographical sense to the two which alone his learning was able to adduce.⁴

Of these the former is from Jerome's Preface to Job:

Habeant qui uolunt ueteres libros uel in membranis purpureis auro argentoque descriptos uel uncialibus (ut uulgo aiunt) litteris—onera magis exarata quam codices—dum modo mihi meisque permittunt pauperes habere schedulas et non tam pulchros codices quam emendatos.

The latter is from *Epist.* 5 of Seruatus Lupus, written to Einhard:⁵

Praeterea scriptor regius Bertcaudus dicitur antiquarum litterarum, dumtaxat earum quae maximae sunt et unciales a quibusdam uocari existimantur, habere mensuram descriptam. Itaque si penes uos est, mittite

¹ *Class. Rev.*, XVII (1903), 387.

² *Class. Rev.*, XVIII (1904), 48.

³ *Transactions and Proceedings*, XLIII (1912), lvii ff.

⁴ *De Re Diplomatica*, ed. 1789, p. 48.

⁵ Migne, *Patr. Lat.*, CXIX, 448 C.

mihi eam per hunc quaeso pictorem, cum redierit, schedula tamen diligentissime sigillo munita. [By *dumtaxat* Lupus doubtless meant *scilicet*, as Mabillon perceived.]

Mabillon himself did not make separate classes of "capitals" and "uncials," nor did he understand either Jerome or Lupus to draw any specific distinction between them. Indeed, he states expressly that Jerome's *pauperes schedulae et codices* must have been written with characters of the same shape as those employed in the more elegant books, only smaller in size. Following Mabillon's opinion, the more common judgment of these later times has been that Jerome and Lupus must be understood to include both capitals and uncials without discrimination under the common denomination *unciales* (Wattenbach must perhaps be excepted, so far as his interpretation of Lupus is concerned).

I do not feel sure that this conclusion is justifiable. In the first place, Jerome's only purpose is, to be sure, to emphasize the distinction in point of elegance between his own *pauperes codices* and the calligraphic masterpieces esteemed by others. He is not primarily concerned with the classification or nomenclature of hands. This is but an incidental matter in his discussion. Yet he clearly does distinguish by *uel . . . uel* two mutually exclusive classes of *codices*: the former, those written in gold or silver on purple skins; the latter, those written in "what are popularly called 'uncial' letters." At first sight the distinction may not appear to be logically drawn, the qualities selected as the test of the discrimination not being of the same class. The former is extrinsic to the style of writing, the latter intrinsic. But our chief concern is not with the criticism of Jerome's logic, but with the determination of his meaning. If there be a defect in his rhetoric, it is due merely to his antecedent assumption of the reader's knowledge of a state of things not so well known to us. Evidently both purple-and-gold books and those written in "uncials" were, in Jerome's eyes, products of luxury rather than of scholarship; but just as evidently the books in "uncial" letters were not written with gold and silver on purple skins, and conversely the purple *codices* were not written in "uncial" characters. The fashionable elegance of the one class is marked by the purple-and-gold equipment rather than by the style of its

letters; that of the other is sufficiently established by its being written in "uncial" script.

Again, Jerome's *ut uulgo aiunt* appears to indicate that the *unciales litterae* were of a more new-fangled fashion than those of the purple *codices*. Being of more recent appearance in the world, they have acquired a distinctive appellation, while the older established characters have never had one, and do not need one, being taken for granted. Similarly in our own times, when the "round hand" was introduced into our public schools, it received a specific name to describe it, but no especial designation was generally applied to the older fashion of penmanship which it aimed to supplant. Of course, if a newer style of writing succeeds in establishing itself as a rival beside the older, the time is inevitable when not merely the *parvenu* but the scion of the older aristocracy as well will need a specific title for ready identification. But that day had apparently not yet dawned when Jerome was writing. (Jerome does not appear—or is it merely a humorous affectation?—to be able to understand the word *uncialis* in other than its old-fashioned sense, pertaining to weight; hence his jesting remark that books written in that character are certainly heavy, *onera* rather than *codices*.)

Now the conclusions thus drawn from Jerome's censure fall in precisely with what we know at the present time of the paleographical history of capital and uncial writing. There would appear to be little doubt that uncial was already fairly established as a book-hand in Jerome's time, but as a newer style which had not yet driven out the capital from that field; and particularly that the purple-vellum *éditions de luxe* were at that period written in capitals, the use of uncials for such magnificent volumes not coming in as a regular thing till a later date.¹

It appears probable, then, that Jerome by *litterae unciales* meant just what we mean by "uncials." He takes it for understood that the purple *codices* with gold or silver letters are written in the more ancient and conservative form of what we call "capitals." He does not mention the common and established capital writing in black on uncolored parchment or vellum, because it is not in point for his purpose: that style is dignified, but not ostentatious. What he

¹ Cf. Wattenbach, *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter*,³ pp. 132 ff.

has to say amounts to this: "Let others enjoy, if they will, the old magnificence of writing in gold or silver on purple vellum, or the newer-fangled fashionable elegance of books in 'uncial' characters (as they are popularly called), if only they will leave me my simpler style, and texts that may make up in correctness what they lack in beauty."

It is not at all necessary to my argument to determine what the hand of Jerome himself and that of the books he favored actually was, provided only it was neither "capital" nor "uncial," that is, neither of the large styles. As a fact, it was probably a form of the more minute and compact cursive, or a modified cursive-and-minuscule, and not at all, as Mabillon in his lack of acquaintance with cursive supposed it must of necessity have been, a reduced-size version of the majuscule hands which Jerome censured. My colleague, Professor Beeson, suggests that Jerome may have written a hand like that of the Oxyrhynchus Livy.¹ It is of course possible that Jerome thought the purple *codices* with gold or silver letters as modern a product of luxury and fantasy as the uncial script, but I am more inclined to believe that to his mind the "uncials" alone (as he marks by quoting the popular name given them by the amateurs, as if he disdained to understand it) were justly chargeable with novelty as well as extravagance. The variant reading—*inicialibus* for *uncialibus*—found in some of the poorer MSS of Jerome's treatise I think (with Mr. Madan) must be explained as purely a paleographical error arising in the minuscule stage of the tradition (un->ini-), though just conceivably helped on by the mediaeval confusion about the meaning of *unciales*, and the fact that capital letters were still employed in that period as headings and initials.

The only way that I can see for avoiding this conclusion that assigns to Jerome's own era, or that immediately preceding it, the use of *unciales* in the now accepted sense, is to assert that he must have meant to say "purple *codices*, or all the others that at any rate are written in majuscules." But this is to impose upon his expression in the interest of a preconceived opinion a meaning that "*uel* . . . *uel*" unmodified by other words (*saltem*, *utique*) does not properly bear, or to imagine that he was unable to express himself with

¹ *New Pal. Society*, S. I, Pl. 53.

clearness sufficient for the understanding of his readers. But neither Jerome's thought nor his power of expression is ordinarily lacking in clarity. And, indeed, I do not see why one should be tempted to shrink from the conclusion I have drawn. The older capital and the more novel "uncial" book-hands were both existent in Jerome's day, and men were then quite competent to distinguish between them, and to assign a distinctive appellation to the newer style; nor is there, so far as I can see, in the name itself anything less consonant with popular usage in the fourth or fifth centuries than later on in the Middle Ages. There is no legitimate reason for wonder that the use of the paleographical term should not have so persisted till Charlemagne's time that the scholars of his court could have been in no doubt about its proper meaning. I am not aware that even from that active era of study and reform in writing a full equipment of technical nomenclature was handed on to the later ages.

To turn to the question of what Seruatus Lupus, four centuries later than Jerome, understood by *unciales litterae*, let me remark at the outset that his phrase "*quae . . . unciales a quibusdam uocari existimantur*" sounds to me suspiciously as though it were founded eventually if not primarily on the *uncialibus (ut uulgo aiunt) litteris* of Jerome. It may well be that among the scholars who were interested in the reformation of writing under Charlemagne there had arisen discussion not merely about the ancient styles of penmanship but about the names applied to them. In such a case this passage from Jerome's well-known book would certainly not fail to attract attention, and unless there were a definite tradition concerning its meaning, it certainly would not be deemed so clear as not to need discussion. The words of Lupus would then imply a certain lack of unanimity in the interpretation. But perhaps it is quite as likely that Lupus has in mind no learned discussion among his contemporaries, but is simply quoting independently and informally from (or paraphrasing) Jerome himself, who supplied him with the name. But as to the particular letters which Lupus says "some people are believed to call 'uncials'" (or "are believed by some people to be [properly] called 'uncials'"), he describes them as the largest (so I take it the superlative must be

understood) among the ancient styles. Now, earlier manuscripts of substantially three different sizes (as well as styles) of letters were certainly familiarly known to Lupus—the largest ("capitals"), a medium-sized ("uncials"), and the smallest ("minuscules," whether Merovingian or other). Therefore by *maximae* I think it most likely that "capitals" are specifically meant. If he had in mind "uncials," it seems hardly probable that he would have used the superlative instead of the comparative to describe their size, or would have failed otherwise to make his meaning clear. Moreover, it appears likely that the capital alphabet (i.e., the "rustic" capital) rather than the uncial was the one most likely to be useful to him as a model of calligraphy, for capitals continued to be in use for limited and specific purposes even after the Caroline reform was well established, and it is well known, especially since the researches of L. Delisle, that the ancient capital writing was most carefully imitated by the scribes of the school of St. Martin in Tours in the ninth century. By the *mensura* which Lupus desired we are doubtless to understand not a brief and general statement of the dimensions of capitals, but a carefully drawn scheme of the entire alphabet with indicated size and proportions of each letter. Such a plan the calligrapher of the imperial court was reported to have drawn, and Einhard might be able to get for his friend the original or a copy of it. The document is to be treated as a valuable thing—it is to be carefully sealed before despatching it.

I think it probable, therefore, that though neither ancient nor mediaeval scholars had any concept of paleography as a *historische Hilfswissenschaft*, or were curious about questions of discrimination and classification of hands, both Jerome and Lupus recognized a distinction between "capitals" and "uncials" (as we now call them), and the earlier writer quoted *unciales* in the modern sense and application, while the words of the later may indicate at least a current doubt whether what we know as "capitals" were properly to be called *unciales*.